



You go up a rickety stairwell, dark even in the daytime. The building on crowded Nilmoni Mitra Street in north Calcutta has seen better days, like many others in this older part of the city. You enter a small room. The red cement floor is cool to the bare feet, reminiscent of a past era. The center of the room is empty but the corners are stacked with bedrolls, utensils, water bottles. Musical instruments, drums, cymbals, gongs are piled in a corner.

Today, the room is filled with the laughter of men and women in colorful attire. Two garlands of sweet-smelling flowers and boxes of sweets are arranged on a stool. Two members of the group are getting married. They exchange the garlands, bonding as husband and wife. Somebody breaks into a lilting Bengali song. Among the happy chorus of con-

Blind Opera Seeing the World in Their Own Way

By RANJITA BISWAS

gratulations and laughter you notice one difference. Both bride Chumki Pal and groom Sandeep Chatterjee are blind, as are most of the people surrounding them. Pal lost her sight at the age of two due to wrong treatment for an ailment. She is wearing a bright turquoise blue sari with gold trimmings for this memorable day. “I know it’s blue because people have told me but I can’t imagine how it looks. But believe me, when I dream, I dream only in colors,” she says. Chatterjee is an undergraduate student majoring in music at Rabindra Bharati University. Their romance blossomed when they met as members of Blind Opera, a performing arts group of Calcutta and the only one of its kind in the country as well as in Asia that consistently puts on shows like professional groups.

The 36 spirited members of Blind Opera, most of whom are totally blind, demon-

strate that physical disability is not an obstacle. They enact plays such as *Raja* (King of the Dark Chamber) or *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander) by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, considered challenging even by veteran theater groups.

Since it was launched, in 1996, Blind Opera has performed not only in Calcutta but also in other cities. The Opera is the product of four theater aficionados—Ashok Pramanik, Debashish Choudhury, Subhashish Gangopadhyay and Prasanta Chatterjee—who took it as a challenge to get together the talents of these visually impaired men and women. Except Chatterjee, who is a social activist, all of them used to be members of well-known theater groups of the city but broke away to devote their time and energy to developing the Blind Opera concept.

Why the label “opera” for a drama repertoire? “Well, in older days our plays

were all in opera style,” says director Gangopadhyay. “There was singing, dancing and dialogues accompanied by instrumental music. And that’s what we do.”

The idea of the Blind Opera germinated in 1994 when they conducted a workshop at the Calcutta Blind School at Behala in the southern fringe of the city to produce the play *Jata Durei Jai* (However Far We Travel) for its centenary celebration. After the event, the participants wanted to continue their training in performing arts.

The challenge to present the cast on stage is immense since space management is a problem. To solve this, the directors use ropes to separate the stage and the wings. When the actors step on the rope they know that it is the entrance to the stage. Gangopadhyay says that even though the members cannot see, they can smell, hear and touch—three elements



Members of the Blind Opera have been staging professional plays in Calcutta since 1996. They act, teach, direct and serve as a link for isolated groups and individuals. Subhas Dey (far left) plays Bishu Pagal, in conversation with Nazma Khatun (left), the only sighted member of the group, in the role of Nandini in an October 10, 2005, production of Rabindranath Tagore's Raktakarabi in Salt Lake, Calcutta.

inherent to any theater. "At Blind Opera we believe that the blind can see. That is, they see in their own way, if not in our way, with the help of these abilities."

Gangopadhyay believes that, for the visually impaired, theater is the best medium for expression of their creative urges. "They respond instinctively; they cannot copy anyone else because they cannot see. Their body language tells the story and hence it is very spontaneous."

The cast of Blind Opera challenges the audience too—to judge them on their

They do not feel isolated anymore because they can relate to their fellow performers. As Debashish Das, 18, a partially blind boy, says: "I had to leave my studies after the school finals. I was sitting around at home, doing nothing. Now I feel useful. I belong." It also has a therapeutic effect because their confidence grows as they are able to reach out to the sighted audiences. Marzina Khatun, mother of a young child, echoes the feelings of others when she says they build a bridge between the "seeing" world and the dark world of their own.



Blind Opera members (from left) Samir Ghoshal, Pallav Haldar and Subhas Dey act out main characters in Rabindranath Tagore's play Raktakarabi, while other members of the troupe portray the king's security forces in the background.

merits and not condescendingly. In the beginning there was apprehension even among the founders: were the productions going to be considered "artistic," or remain just "productions"? To their credit, the members have earned kudos from Calcutta audiences. All the members take part in the productions, no one is left out and it is very democratic.

However, when they conceived the idea of such a group, the foursome did not visualize it as just a performing arts troupe. Though artistic qualities were given due importance, the focus was more on "drama therapy" through which they could communicate better with the world around them.

For the members of the troupe, discovering the language of the body is in a way also a journey of the persona. Coming from diverse backgrounds but bound together by the same disability, they have found an outlet for their creativity through the plays.

They sing, they dance, and they experience joy. The joy of being able to communicate, both at the personal level and to the audience, is so great that they do not mind coming from afar to the venue in the evening, even traveling two to three hours in crowded buses and trains. Sometimes during rehearsals, they stay late.

Blind Opera does not stand isolated from other disabled groups, either. Since 2000, it has been organizing *Pratibondhi o Prantik Natyotsav*, a theater festival of the disabled and marginal. "By the marginal," says Pramanik, "we mean those discarded or ignored by society, like street kids, children of sex workers, etc., who do not get an opportunity to perform on a common platform."

One day of the festival is marked as a *paan-supari utsav* (betel nut festival). On this day, different groups exchange the traditional symbols of friendship, an effort

at bridge-building within the community.

There is also a greater purpose behind it: to use theater to build a community and mainstream the huge number of disabled living in isolation. Together they can be a force to demand better facilities in public life. For instance, members of the group attended a December 2004 presentation at the American Center in which Elizabeth Kahn of Arts Access in Raleigh, North Carolina, demonstrated the technologies of audio description, a narrative service that attempts to describe images of theater, film, television and other art forms so that the visually impaired can enjoy them. Without such help, a blind person can experience theater only through the whispered asides of a sighted companion. Pramanik also believes that blind children should enter the mainstream from the beginning and take part in as many physical activities as possible. "Often, parents hide away a child with a disability or don't give as much attention. If you suddenly want a grown-up boy to play football, for example, he cannot because by that time his body is too sedentary and he cannot respond."

Blind Opera members organize drama therapy workshops and teach in the blind schools in West Bengal, linking isolated groups or individuals. The Government of India's education department supports this project. The second generation of directors is coming up, Gangopadhyay says proudly. Lead actor Subhas Dey, who is blind, has directed *Aleek Dristi* (Divine Vision). His next production is *Waiting for Godot*. "Together they will carry forward the movement, and we, the initiators, will be in the background," Gangopadhyay says.

The big dream of the group is to establish a *Natya Vidyalay*, a drama school following the ideal of Tagore's Santiniketan, offering a platform for creative expression of the disabled and marginal—all those who are economically and socially forced to stay in the periphery. Like Chumki Pal, they all dream in color. □

About the Author: *Ranjita Biswas is a Calcutta-based freelancer who also translates literature and writes fiction.*